

# The Colin Wiles blog

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## Is it a charter?

So, the Housing White Paper, aka The Charter for Social Housing residents, was finally published on Tuesday, a mere 41 months after the Grenfell fire and 27 months after the Green Paper. Was it worth the wait?

I spent most of Tuesday writing a briefing and my cautious answer is 'yes'. If our lawmakers implement it in full then it could be a real boost for residents in social housing, enabling them to seek redress for bad service, to hold bad landlords to account, and to have a greater say in how their landlord operates. In his introduction, the Prime Minister says he wants to level up the country and "*that includes making sure social housing tenants are treated with the respect they deserve*". The key themes of the paper seem to be safety, fairness and respect.

First, the good parts. The standout proposal, for me, is putting the consumer standards on a level playing field with the economic standards. That has to be right. The Regulator of Social Housing has around 250 staff dealing with the economic standards and only two on the consumer side. Only around 1% of referrals lead to a judgement of serious detriment – actual or potential harm. This will mean a big increase in staff at the regulator and there will be more inspections and potential penalties for providers. The consumer standards will also be beefed up to include more on safety and a requirement that providers have policies on domestic violence, something my colleague Alison Inman has been campaigning on for years.

The paper proposes that providers have nominated staff to be responsible for safety and for compliance with the consumer standards. This mirrors the proposals in the Building Safety Bill for accountable persons to be identified for higher-risk buildings, and perhaps reflects the awful buck-passing that we have seen at the Grenfell Inquiry. In future, we will know exactly where the buck stops, but it will put a huge level of responsibility on the shoulders of some staff and they will need to be trained and supported in their roles. Plans to update the Decent Homes Standard, now nearly 20 years old, to reflect climate change and new innovations are sensible.

The proposed tenant satisfaction measures also seem sensible, with new measures of landlords' respectful and helpful engagement being required. That will be a tricky one to measure.

Another stand-out is the requirement to publish details of executive salaries and management costs relative to the size of the landlord. That is already a requirement in annual reports but I am assuming that this will have to be issued in a more digestible and meaningful way, perhaps by showing how much each tenant pays a week towards the CEO salary. This

reflects growing unease about the perception of excessive salaries in the sector, with inflation-busting pay rises often the norm. I once did some work at a small association with around 300-odd properties where the chief executive had a package of around £100,000, so each tenant was paying around £5 a week towards their remuneration. That cannot be fair or right, and it is certainly not respectful of tenants.

The access to information scheme proposal is interesting. It is Freedom of Information in all but name and the government will need to tread carefully to make sure that it does not tip housing associations back into the “public body” category. (If you recall, the government had to introduce emergency legislation back in 2017 when the Office for National Statistics decided that English housing associations were no longer public bodies, due to the level of government regulation and control.) But it is certainly fair that housing association tenants should have the right to obtain information from their landlord on a par with local authority tenants.

Other proposals to beef up the ombudsman, to improve co-operation with the regulator, and to end the democratic filter are all good stuff.

The paper also recognises the importance of green and open spaces, as well as pets, for mental health and wellbeing, particularly during the pandemic when home and neighbourhood has been so important. I would imagine the consumer standards will be beefed up to reflect this.

Now, the not so good bits. First, the time it has taken to get to this point. It suggests a lack of serious regard for the issues arising from the Grenfell catastrophe.

Second, this is not a charter, despite what it says on the tin. My definition of a charter is a statement of rights and this document is a mishmash of proposals and ideas for future consultation. Perhaps a more formal document will be issued in due course?

Third, there is not much here about leadership by boards and councillors, even though their roles will be critical in taking this forward. Finally, Chapter 7. Why on earth is it in there? Having spent 63 pages telling us that social housing is important, that social housing residents need to be treated with respect and fairness, this final chapter effectively says, “But ownership is better”. It seems the government cannot resist plugging homeownership at every opportunity.

But overall, this is a positive step forward. Good landlords will have nothing to fear from it – the information should all be available and the changes should be capable of swift implementation. But for bad landlords there will be fewer hiding places if and when these changes take shape.

My twofold advice would be: make sure that your governing body reads every word of this document and that they provide the necessary leadership to take it forward, and, second, immediately start drawing up an action plan. Alistair McIntosh has produced a useful checklist of all the items that you should be working on, [available on the HQN website](#). In summary, two and a bit cheers for the government.

## About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

